

CitizenSpark No. 16: Don't call it slacktivism

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Maybe you've noticed a recent change in your friends' social media profile pictures. Over the last few weeks on Facebook and Twitter, more and more Canadians' faces have become obscured by bold capital letters declaring, "I Will Vote Oct. 19." It's an online get-out-the-vote effort that itself has a familiar face — Rick Mercer, host of the CBC's Rick Mercer Report.

Mercer is one of the driving forces behind votation.ca, where you can apply the I Will Vote filter to a photo of your own. And while it's easy to dismiss this kind of online effort as slacktivism, changing your profile picture could actually inspire your friends to vote.

According to research by Samara Canada, a non-partisan charity that promotes civic engagement, social pressure is one of the top six reasons why people vote. If you vote and talk about it with family and friends, or post about it on social media, you're making the people around you more likely to vote as well.

"It's basically the notion that voting is contagious," says Mercer. "Now, I can't go and infiltrate every social circle in the country, but I thought that using Facebook and Twitter, you can certainly make your intentions known."

Over 150,000 people have used the filter so far. Mercer is now partnering with Facebook and expects that the number of users will continue to rise through election day.

The process can intimidate those who have never voted, or who still perceive it as something only certain "political" people partake in. Mercer thinks his filter can help change that. "It just says so much if someone looks at his or her friend list," he says. "Sure, their nerdy, political-science-major friend is voting. But then they look and next to that, the person they never hear talk about politics...they're voting as well."

The trickier part comes once someone makes up his or her mind to vote: which party and candidate should they support? Self-described political junkie Mercer advises against going to the parties' websites for information on their platforms.

"They're certainly not going out of their way to tell you what they stand for," he says. "There are lots of pictures of them, the proverbial walking-through-pumpkin-patches and kissing babies, and lots of catchphrases." Instead, he suggests people use resources like vote compass sites and independent websites that break down the platforms.

Mercer has been careful not to include any of the party colours on the Vote Nation website. "I didn't want anything that anyone could interpret as ideological other than supporting the notion of voting," he says.

Of course, after a weekend of political research, talking to friends, and showing off your new election-themed profile pic, a different social pressure may take over when you remember there's a Blue Jays game on Monday night.

But, says Mercer, "I think people will schedule their day accordingly so they can enjoy a great Canadian game and do their duty as a great Canadian on the same day.

"It's a doubleheader."